

**Public health issues associated with raising backyard poultry**  
**Brooke Rossheim, M.D., M.P.H.**  
**Rappahannock Area Health District**  
**July 2, 2012**

Please note that the Virginia Department of Health does not have an official policy or guidance document about the raising of backyard poultry.

The primary risk associated with chickens and other poultry is that it is common that they carry *Salmonella* bacteria in their intestines and shed *Salmonella* in their feces. *Salmonella* can be present on the animal itself (its beak, feathers, feet, etc), the cage or area where it lives and anywhere it roams. Therefore, it is not recommended that poultry live in individuals' homes. Chicken eggs can also carry *Salmonella*; thus, they must be cooked thoroughly before eating. There are other infectious agents associated with backyard raising of poultry that have the potential to be transmitted to humans.

Poultry usually do not become ill even if they carry *Salmonella* bacteria. However, *Salmonella* infection can make humans ill. People contract *Salmonella* infection from their hands or other objects coming into contact with poultry feces and then touching their mouth or the area around the mouth. *Salmonella* can cause fever, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain. Infants, the elderly and individuals with a weakened immune system are at higher risk of developing a more severe *Salmonella* infection.

There are measures people working with backyard poultry can take to reduce the risk of developing *Salmonella* infection:

- Keeping baby and adult chickens away from people with weaker immune systems (for example, individuals receiving cancer chemotherapy or those with HIV infection)
- Washing hands thoroughly with soap and water after touching live poultry or areas where poultry live or roam
- Adults should supervise handwashing for young children who handle poultry
- Avoidance of eating or drinking in areas where poultry live or roam
- It is recommended that poultry not live in people's homes
- Regular cleaning, done outside the house, of equipment used to take care of poultry with hot soapy water or a mild bleach solution

Aside from *Salmonella*, there are other potential concerns associated with backyard poultry. Poultry manure may attract insects and cause unpleasant odors and there will likely be noise from the animals. These issues are generally considered nuisance problems and are not public health hazards per se.

**Impressions:**

1. Individuals wishing to raise backyard poultry should be aware of the potential risks of doing so and weigh this against the benefit they wish to achieve. Individuals engaged in this activity should take appropriate infection prevention measures.
2. From a public health perspective, there does not appear to be sufficient risk of harm to the public to ban the practice of raising backyard poultry. The health risks associated with backyard poultry apply mainly to individuals having direct contact with the animals, their surroundings and equipment needed to care for them.

**References:**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Keeping Backyard Poultry.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/SalmonellaPoultry/>. Accessed 5/31/2012.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health risks associated with raising chickens.  
[www.cdc.gov/healthypets/pdf/intown\\_flocks.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/pdf/intown_flocks.pdf). Accessed 6/12/2012.

Illinois Department of Public Health. Human Health Concerns About Raising Poultry.  
<http://www.idph.state.il.us/health/infect/Poultry.htm>. Accessed 6/13/2012.